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ABSTRACT

In 1990, Patricia Bizzell suggested that, in the next rhetorical turn of composition research, scholars might begin to find an alternative to the current anti-foundation "smirk of skepticism" that teacher-researchers can agree upon. Bizzell points to the student's need for "usable truths" from a trustworthy authority. But what constitutes a "usable truth" in the composition classroom? One such concept could be developed from the "epistemology of contradiction" that Peter Elbow has been advocating for the past 25 years. In this epistemology, the aim is to teach and keep what D. H. Lawrence called the "trembling instability of the balance" in writing pedagogy. This kind of collaboration among conflicting views creates what Elbow calls the "large-minded dialectic" that seeks to move from rhetorical warfare to rhetorical cooperation. As Elbow points out, holding on to oppositions or "embracing contraries" is hard work. It is easier to do one thing or the other, to believe or to doubt. Bizzell, in her critique of James Berlin's experimental writing class at Purdue University, shows that an open and large-minded dialectic or an embracing of contraries is more effective with students than indirect scripting and false pretenses. The exploration of contraries, finally, has a place in expressivist pedagogies because contraries must be embraced by the individual; it has not been that long since women and minorities, as individuals, did not have a voice at all. (Contains 12 references.) (TB)

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ED 401 536

Developing A Pedagogy of Contraries

Rosalee Stilwell

In 1990, Patricia Bizzell suggested that, in the next rhetorical turn of composition research, we might begin to find an alternative to the current anti-foundation "smirk of skepticism" that teacher-researchers can agree upon. What Bizzell and others are responding to is the ideological vacuum left in the wake of critical relativism. Bizzell points to the student's need for "usable truths" from a trustworthy authority. That need has become all the more acute six years later as we and our students reflect on the social unrest and uncertainly that faces our society today. But what constitutes a "usable truth" in the composition classroom? One such concept could be developed from the "epistemology of contradiction" that Peter Elbow has been advocating for the past twenty-five years.

In this epistemology, the aim is to teach and keep what D.H. Lawrence called "the trembling instability of the balance" in our pedagogy. This kind of collaboration among conflicting views creates what Elbow calls the "large-minded dialectic" that seeks to move from rhetorical warfare to rhetorical cooperation. To adopt this epistemology of contradiction as teacher-scholars means that it will, of course, influence our classroom pedagogy--a place where such a theory might be usefully tested. This pedagogy of contraries would signify in the writing classroom and how it might enable students to engage in an examination of discourses that oppose or contradict each other. Students would be urged to engage in what James Berlin has called "the network of

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intersecting discourses" that informs their worked today, enlarging not only their capacity for reasoned argument but also for peaceful resolution of differences.

Using Helene Cixous' argument that whenever there are polar oppositions, there is always dominance as a kind of "straw woman," Elbow historicizes the idea of binary oppositions ("Binary" 179). He traces the idea from the neo-Platonic Boethius to Hegel who, he says, attempts to resolve the problem of dominance by suggesting a transcendence or synthesis of diversity. Elbow calls for what he believes is a return to what Boethius, Abelard, and other ancients subscribed as the answer to the problem of oppositions: "The goal is a lack of resolution of opposites" ("Binary" 180). He applies idea to seven "opposites" in the discipline of composition: generating as opposed to criticizing, doubting as opposed to believing, and teachers as allies as opposed to teachers as adversaries. With these pairs of opposites comes a list of five options that Elbow sees as possible ways of how to deal with such contraries including, of course, not dealing with them, but affirming them (181-182). Once again, Elbow is fighting (as he describes it) for the peaceful resolution of difference by allowing difference *to be*. As he points out in this essay and in the two others that preceded it, holding on to oppositions or "embracing contraries" is hard work. It is easier to do one thing or the other, to be a true believer or a true skeptic.

In arguing for the practice of "large minded dialectic," he echoes Patricia Bizzell's suspicions of the narrow either/or thinking of postmodernists in her essay "Beyond Anti-

Foundationalism to Rhetorical Authority: Problems Defining 'Cultural Literacy'", published in 1990. She wrote,

> I am coming to suspect, however, that the academic discourse community its not such a stable entity that once can define our teaching problem in terms of how to get student writing to approximate a set of well-known and accepted academic models . . . I now think the academic discourse community is more unstable than this --more fraught with contradiction, more polyvocal--and that this instability is a sign of its health, its ability to adapt to changing historical conditions. I think it would be a mistake to rush closure on a unitary conception of what academic discourse should be and then turn this concept into a Procrustean bed that all student--and professional writing--must fit. (663)

Bizzell is alluding to is the loss of individuality such "a unitary conception" of language--of knowledge-making--can bring. Furthermore, she charges,

> We have not yet taken the next, crucially important step in our rhetorical turn. We have not yet acknowledged that if no unimpeachable authority and transcendent truth exist, this does not mean that no respectable authority and no usable truth exist. Our nostalgia for the self-evident and absolute prevents us from accepting as legitimate the authority created by collective discursive exchange and its truths as provisionally binding . . .

> Indeed, we might imagine the public function of the intellectual as precisely rhetorical: our task is to aid everyone in our academic community, and in our national community, to share a discourse. (665)

It is here, as an answer to Bizzell's concerns, that there is a place for Elbow's ideas to be fully considered. It is in this very next rhetorical turn which Bizzell mentions that we might try Elbow's advice about "embracing the contraries" to find a "usable truth." Without conducting a large-minded, even-handed national, community, and personal dialectic, we are in danger of becoming, as Elbow says, "too skeptical or unhopeful" ("Binary" 199). Bizzell also discusses what she sees as the dangerous result of *not* engaging in the practice of dialectics:

> In their deconstructive mode, the anti-foundationalist critics do point out the effect of historical circumstances on notions of the true and good which their opponents claim are outside time. In other words, the critics show that these notions consist in ideologies. But once the ideological interest has been pointed out, the anti-foundationalists throw up their hands. And because they have no positive program, the anti-foundationalist critic may end up tacitly supporting the political and cultural *status quo*. (667)

This kind of political quietism, as Bizzell calls it (667), is the result of not being able to hold opposites or contraries in our minds, but having to have only one answer--even if that answer is "nothing is right." What Bizzell urges is a national dialectic between humanists that addresses the question of finding usable truths after we've discovered that nothing is absolutely right. She is saying, in effect, what Elbow is and has been saying: it will require playing aloud the game of doubting and believing, even by those that practice "the smirk of skepticism" that Bizzell believes is the epistemological pose in academia today.

It's interesting to note that in the same article Bizzell offers a critique of James Berlin's pedagogy in an experimental freshman writing class at Purdue University (which Berlin himself had described as "failed") (670, 672). In this course, Berlin asked his students deconstruct dominant ideologies on relations between the sexes and between employers and workers. According to Bizzell, Berlin found that students left the class firmly grasping the ideas they entered with: prostitution is defensible as a woman's right to work, unsafe working conditions only made them tougher, and unjustified pay cuts were "good lessons" designed to help them get ahead, etc. Bizzell points out that, although Berlin told his students that he was a Marxist but insisted his position was value-neutral and anti-authoritarian, he utilized politics and exercised authority by the very form and content of the course. He should have, she suggests, openly stated the aims of the course and of his intentions for those students, perhaps allaying the idea that he had a hidden political agenda (which he

did) and that the students quite naturally defended themselves against (668, 672). What Bizzell is saying, in other words, is that Berlin may have benefited from *openly* conducting a large-minded dialectic or embracing the contraries of that classroom situation, which is, of course, precisely Elbow's point.

Trying out new experiments in freshman composition is, it seems to me, a good thing--even if they sometimes fail. Working our theories out in the classroom is a good way of finding those "usable truths" for ourselves and our students. If we are able (given our own personal and political situations), we should be cautious about silencing students with our own "scripting" of the classroom subtext by keeping our own subjectivity submerged under false pretences. Students are quick to perceive this kind of dishonesty. I know I have been.

"Surfacing" our own interests and that of others finally brings us to Susan Jarrett's charge that "[E]xpressivism suppresses confrontation over these differences and "casts into a shadow" the "complexities of social differentiation and inequities that late-twentieth century capitalist society [has] thrown into the shadows by the bright spotlight focused on the individual" (1991, 109). I'm not sure that expressivist teaching pedagogy is necessarily casting anyone in the shadows. Free-writing and other pedagogical spotlights on the individual do not necessarily need to place the individual at the center of our epistemology. In Writing Without Teachers, Peter Elbow's pedagogy is used to articulate the competing discourses within writers, un-freeze the frozen tongues. Although I respect Jarratt's concern for any

theory that did silence marginalized groups for the glory of a single voice, I'm not convinced that the focus should be turned away from freeing the single/multiple frozen tongue(s). After all, it hasn't been very long since women and people of color were entirely silenced, right down to the individual. We were not thought human enough to have a "self" to worry about. Jarrett overlooks this. The "spotlight of late-twentieth century capitalist society" has not, in fact, been shining on people of color or females. If, as Jarrett implies, Elbow's expressivist, subjective theory allows those people experience something of the light, most of us would like it to last awhile. Obviously, there is much in this line of thinking that disturbs me, as it also does Toni Morrison:

> Whole schools of criticism have dispossessed the writer of any place whatever in the critical value of his work. Ideas, craft, vision, meaning--all of them are just so much baggage in these critical systems. . . . The political consequences for minority writers, dissident writers and writers committed to social change are devastating. For it means that there is no way to talk about what we mean, because to mean anything is not in vogue. (Sanders 25).

In the end--or perhaps the beginning--at attempting to find a way to practice embracing the contraries inherent in all such ideological debates, we've got to engage in listening and

speaking, two opposites in themselves. As Elbow sums up (at least for now) in "Binary Thinking":

> "The reigning epistemology among scholars and academics today in dialectical *in a sense* . . . This epistemology says, in effect, 'I believe X and you believe Y, and there is no real truth or right answer in the back of the book to tell us who is right. So we can keep on fighting.' What I'm looking for is a dialectical epistemology that is more hopeful. It says, 'I believe X and you believe Y, and by gum we may well both be right--absolutely right. So we should figure out ways to work together.' . . . In my vision of how things *can* be, we have the opposite situation: eternal warfare between concepts in the mind--resulting in more cooperations and less zero-sum warfare between people." (199)

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